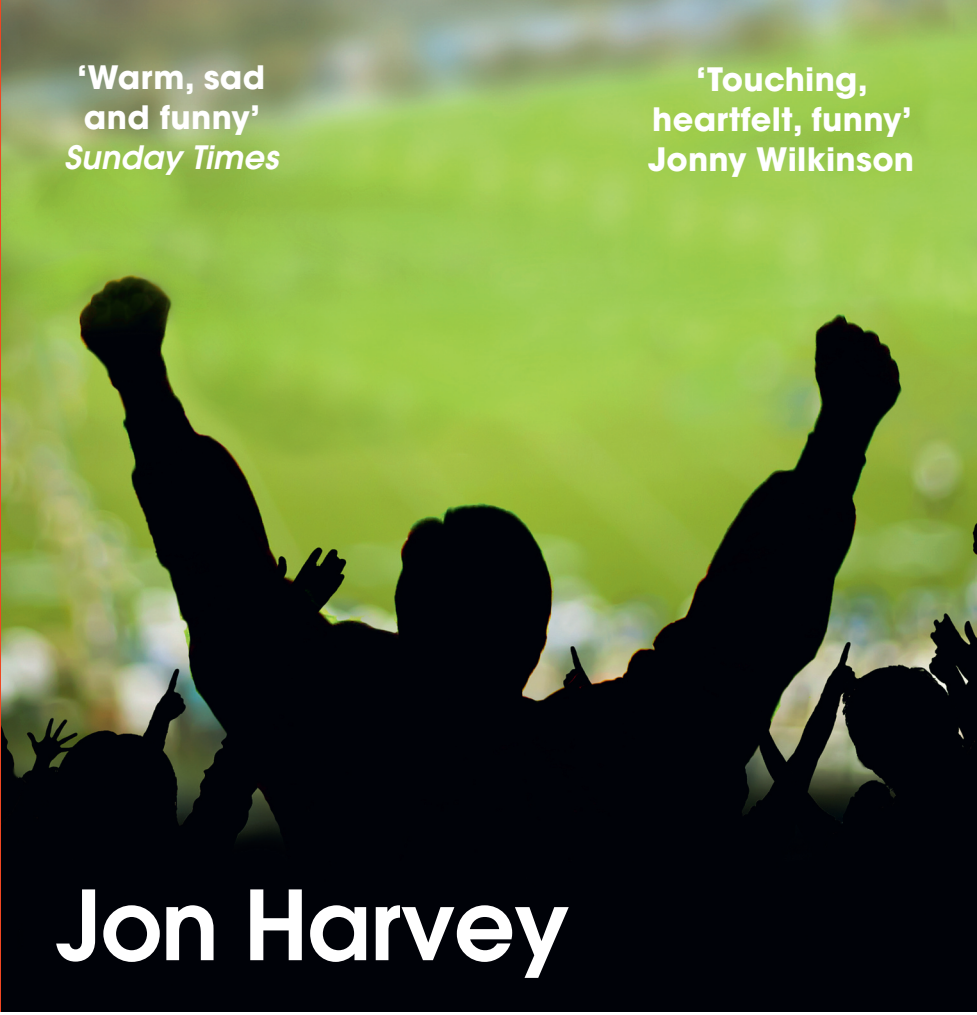
'Warm, sad and funny'
Sunday Times

'Touching, heartfelt, funny'
Jonny Wilkinson



Jon Harvey

A Fan For All Seasons

A Journey Through Life and Sport

Praise for *A Fan for All Seasons*

'Warm, sad and funny . . . There is something very eccentric and British about *A Fan for All Seasons*'
Sunday Times

'Vivid and funny . . . This is a wonderfully touching book about fandom and grief'
Daily Mail

'Both funny and frivolous, sad and serious . . . an uplifting book that ultimately serves to help explain and excuse the time we all spend watching sport'
Radio Times

'The book . . . [has] honesty and passion at its heart. Jon Harvey is an excellent recreator of the atmosphere at a packed stadium or a hushed theatre . . . Most affectingly of all, he shows how sport can play its part in grieving'
Times Literary Supplement

'Acute, funny and moving'
Ian Hislop

'Brilliant. Most men use sport as a way of avoiding having to talk to each other about their feelings. Jon Harvey has turned this idea on its head and used it as a way of understanding his own loss and grief'
Charlie Higson

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‘A lovely, funny, sad and happy book about sport, life, death and remembrance’
Miles Jupp

‘Jon is always surprising, always funny. Which is different from saying he’s surprisingly funny. That would be negative. And I’m being positive. I’ve never done one of these quotes before’
Armando Iannucci

‘Such a good story, touching, heartfelt, funny, informative and beautifully written too’
Jonny Wilkinson

‘A heartfelt memoir through grief, family and a very funny, obsessive love of sports’
Cariad Lloyd

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JON HARVEY

Jon Harvey is a comedy writer, producer and performer. He has produced and written for many of the biggest satirical TV shows of the last thirty years, including *The Thick Of It*, *Have I Got News For You*, *Time Trumpet with Armando Iannucci*, *Yes Minister* and *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*. His work on Radio 4 has won two BBC Audio Drama Awards, and his online comedy videos have amassed over 70 million hits. The *New Yorker* garlanded him for creating one of the 'Jokes of the Year' with his *Succession* parody starring Boris Johnson. Jon is also the human alter-ego of Count Binface, the intergalactic politician who has challenged two Prime Ministers (and counting) at General Elections and is a two-time candidate for Mayor of London.

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To Dan

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‘We all have our time machines, don’t we? Those that take us back are memories . . . And those that carry us forward are dreams.’

H. G. Wells

‘There’s always a story, bro.’

Daniel Harvey

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1

Walk the Line

Let's start at the very beginning. The starting point of all starting points.

It was 2016 – the year everyone called a bad one before all the worse ones that were yet to come – and I was sweating my way through a hot summer's day at the Home of Sport. That's a title to which a fair few venues might like to lay claim: Wembley calls itself *the Home of Football*, Lord's *the Home of Cricket*, St Andrew's *the Home of Golf.* But none of those quite cut the mustard as being the home of Sport with a capital S. There's only one landmark on the planet worthy of that accolade. It's a long oblong of dusty earth, surrounded on all sides by gently rising grass banks and fringed on its horizon by the green hills of the western Greek Peloponnese. Bare but beautiful. Humble but historic. Birthplace of one of humanity's most gargantuan inventions. It's the ancient stadium at Olympia. The most precious site in world sport. And I had the place to myself.

Or what's left of it, anyway. In AD 394 the Olympic Games fell victim to an early version of cancel culture, when the Christian emperor Theodosius cracked down on pagan festivals and banned them. That decision sentenced the sacred site to nearly 2,000 years of looting, neglect and decay, and the Olympia I was looking at had melted into nature. For acre after acre, meek marble stumps of once-mighty temples rose with the weeds out of the crumbling, sun-baked earth. But here used to pulse the quadrennial heartbeat of the Mediterranean. In its heyday this was the hottest of tourist hotspots, boasting not only the Games

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but also one of the Seven Wonders of the World: a vast and astonishing Statue of Zeus. These days both the colossus and the beautiful temple that housed it are long gone, shattered by time into smithereens, and there's a distinct Ozymandias vibe to the few slabs that remain. But while the complex that staged the Games may have been been reduced to rubble, the flame it ignited burns brighter than ever. Thanks to the efforts of William Penny Brookes and Baron Pierre de Coubertin, since 1896 the Olympics have returned to inspire and enrapture billions of lives. Including mine. I'd come here because I wanted to see this sporting crucible for myself and feel its history, its essence. More than that, I needed to.

The ruins of Olympia are imbued with two key things that make sport tick: the glory of winning, and the honour of taking part. And locked within the surviving stones that scatter the site are exotic stories and incredible truths. Of these, the most powerful and poignant is that, all the way back to its origins, sport has gone hand in hand with death. That might sound surprising, but you only need to think back to the Gladiators for proof. Remember how every time Wolf appeared on screen he looked as if he was about to have a heart attack? And turning the clock back further than Saturday teatimes in 1995, or even AD 95 at the Colosseum, historians have traced the origin of competitive sport back to the eighth century BC, when the Greeks invented it as something to do at funerals (presumably because they didn't have smartphones for distraction.) It was out of this funerary tradition that the ancient Olympics, first recorded as taking place in 776 BC, grew. And they were full of death. Never more so than in one of their favourite events, the pankration, which was basically Ultimate Fighting meets Mortal Kombat. Absolved from almost any rules, participants in this all-out slugfest were encouraged to bite, gouge, twist scrotums (NB: each other's) and pretty much anything else besides, and one contestant is even on record as having torn out his opponent's intestines. Peculiar as it might seem to us, this is

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how competitive sport on Earth began. Just as birds are descended from the dinosaurs, so it turns out that snooker is descended from an ancient Greek wrestler ripping out another bloke's duodenum. Death, glorious death, permeated the crusty soil on which I was standing.

And it wasn't just the occasional defeated competitor who perished here and bit the Olympian dust. Also running the gauntlet in antiquity were the thousands upon thousands of fans who'd routinely flock to the Games. For a start, the food on offer was always a bit of a gamble. In *Naked Olympics*, Tony Perrotet itemises the takeaway fare at the early Games as including 'suspicious sausages, rock-hard bread and dubious cheese, to be washed down by throat-scalding resinated wine'. You may, like me, have copped an unfortunate hot-dog or two at a sports event, but this was next-level stuff. Rumours used to swirl around the ancient world of spectators finding 'human flesh and knucklebones in their stew'. Back then, if you caught yourself eating someone's spleen, there was no TripAdvisor on which to vent yours.

But dodgy food was the least of their problems. Disease was so rampant that on-site priests would routinely pray to Zeus, the 'Averter of Flies'. There was no fresh water, nobody washed, riverbeds were turned into giant latrines, every inch of space was taken up by camping and afterwards it could take days to get home. Basically it was Glastonbury without the rain. Or, mercifully for them, Coldplay. If there was a laurel wreath to be won for poor hygiene, ancient Olympia would have strolled to victory every time. More dangerous still was the heat. A Greek philosopher named Thales once wrote that water was the most precious gift in nature, an insight the twenty-first century is rapidly bearing out. But Thales was way ahead of the curve, and on a visit to the Games he emphatically proved his point by dying from dehydration. Conditions were so notorious that one ancient Greek man is recorded as threatening his disobedient slave with a ticket to the Olympics. But nothing could put

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fans off going. Even back then, the magic of sport transcended logic.

It crosses the language barrier, too. Eager to avoid the same fate as Thales, I stopped off at a snack van in the archaeological park for a bottle of water. The vendor pointed at my London 2012 souvenir T-shirt: 'English?' After confirming I was, I discovered that the only other words this cheery Greek and I shared were the names of some Premier League football teams.

'Manchester United!' he exclaimed as he handed over my drink, his smile revealing his allegiance.

I shook my head, then put my thumbs up. 'Tottenham Hotspur!'

The merchant replied with a smile and one further word of English. 'Who?'

In many ways, sport as we now know it is a universe away from the athletic contests that once graced these ancient fields, and for good reason: nobody in their right mind is crying out for the pankration to be an exhibition event at Paris 2024. But as well as inventing the idea of competition, the Greeks were masters of sports administration, and they could teach the International Olympic Committee (IOC) a thing or two about how to run the show. A relic of one of their best ideas endures at Olympia to this day. Lining the path to the old stadium is a row of modest, unadorned stone pedestals, each of which once supported a small bronze statue of Zeus. Together they were known as the Zanes. But it wasn't the statues themselves that were remarkable. It was their purpose. They were funded from the proceeds of fines that had been issued to any athlete who was found to have broken the rules of the Games. And, pointedly, on the plinth beneath each Zeus was written the name and home city of the guilty party, to secure the miscreant's place in eternal infamy. It's thanks to the Zanes that we know about the likes of Eupolus of Thessaly, who in 388 BC bribed three boxers to lose fights against him. Sorry, Eupolus; we still

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haven't forgotten. If everlasting public disgrace wasn't enough, offenders were likely to be beaten and banned from future Games too. The message of the Zanes was stark: don't cheat. And the small number of plinths (only sixteen survive) suggests that it mostly worked. It's a brilliant idea, and if there's a single aspect of the ancient Olympics that could do with being brought back, it's the creation of a Hall of Shame for disgraced athletes. The only hitch would be getting planning permission: nowadays it would need to be very long indeed.

It's only a short walk past the Zanes and through a small stone arch to the stadium itself. The Big Bang of world sport. Where I was now standing. It was rush hour, when hordes of tourists can be expected to pour onto the track. But by sheer luck I'd managed to turn up during a gap between coach parties, and the arena was empty. Silent. Serene. Down at my feet was the original starting line, marked by three parallel rows of thin white blocks. For centuries this was the exact point where sprinters from across the Greek empire and beyond would assemble in their bid to be crowned the fastest human in the world. Now, after who knows how many other millions before me, it was my turn.

On your marks.

Why was I lining up on the starting blocks at ancient Olympia? Because of something that had happened one year earlier in Kensington Olympia. Because of sport and death. Because of Dan.

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2

The Day It All Changed

Some of my favourite stories finish with death. At the end of the *Star Wars* trilogy Darth Vader dies. At the end of *Ghostbusters* the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man dies. At the end of the *Back to the Future* movies, the DeLorean dies. At the end of the last *Jurassic World* movie, the integrity of the franchise died. But this story is going to go against the grain and start with death. Because for those of us left behind, that's how it happens. Death strikes first, and then we have to pick up the pieces and learn to cope. I want to tell you about my older brother, and my oldest friend.

Dan and I grew up together in Croydon. (That's not the sad bit.) He was nine years older than me, which was old enough to be almost like a second dad as well as a sibling. We had a lot in common, including a passion for movies, politics and comedy. More than anything, we shared a love of sport. And by that I mean the arduous, energy-sapping side of sport: being a fan. Playing's for wimps. It's the watching that's the hard part. He was the biggest Crystal Palace FC supporter in the world, which wasn't ideal for me, being a Tottenham fan. But to be fair to Dan, there are much worse things an older brother could be into. Just ask Prince Edward.

We loved all sport and any sport, from kabaddi highlights on Channel 4 to the traditional new year's treat of *World's Strongest Man* (you can't beat an Atlas Stone). If that's not esoteric enough, as kids we'd lap up shows like *Junior Kick Start*, which was a mad BBC series hosted by Peter Purves that ran through

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the Eighties, involving children racing on motorbikes over logs, oil drums, walls and cliff faces. (It was often followed in the schedules by *Junior 24 Hours in A&E*.) We even used to adore the Royal Navy Field Gun Competition at the Royal Tournament. In case it passed you by, until 1999 that was an insane annual race between two teams of sailors in front of a packed house of thousands at London's Earl's Court, televised by the BBC. And what they had to do was this: disassemble a piece of heavy artillery, fly it over a chasm on a zip wire, take it through a tiny door, then reassemble it, fire it, and then do the whole thing in reverse, in the fastest possible time. They don't do it any more, because the Royal Navy doesn't have any guns, and without the guns it was basically just a stag weekend at a Go Ape centre. But Dan and I wouldn't mind. We'd watch *anything* sporty together. Until the morning of Tuesday, 9 June 2015.

It's just before 9 a.m. and London is looking glorious, the way it does when sunlight bathes the city in gold and optimism. A perfect summer's morning. Except in my head, where everything else has been evicted by fear. I'm making the short walk from Earl's Court Station to Dan's dinky studio flat on Ifield Road, trying not to think about what's going to happen next. Clinging to hope but weighed down by dread. Nothing feels real. I'd distract myself by listening to music, but I can't think of anything appropriate. Instead I try to focus on my surroundings. Little details are magnified: the birdsong in the trees, the whisper of leaves on the breeze, the soft hum of a Hoover wafting out of a pub, the gentle clank of empty swings swaying in a playground. Normal things. But normality is a universe away right now, because I'm on my way to find Dan, and I'm very scared.

What's now a terrible, unremitting despair started thirty-six hours ago as a nagging concern. We'd all been due to meet up at my mum Linda's house in Croydon for Sunday lunch: my

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younger sister Lucy, her husband David, Mum, me and Dan. It's not something we often do, but Lucy had taken the initiative to get us together for a bit of family quality time, which sounded like just the ticket. Dan had been having a difficult few months. He'd quit his job with the London Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, possibly after suffering some workplace bullying he was keeping coy about. If that wasn't enough, the council had been continuing to pay his salary in error, which had enabled him to survive financially – until they'd realised their mistake. Now they were demanding their money back and he didn't have a bean. He wasn't exactly a picture of health either. He was forty-three years old, a squat man with a head of short bushy black hair, unfashionable glasses and a slow, shuffling walk due to the obesity he'd carried for his whole adult life. Nothing too notable about any of that in twenty-first century Britain, but since the new year he'd been putting on more weight, and from time to time complained of leg pains.

Through this period Dan had been in touch with me a fair bit, but not because he wanted to chat about his problems. Quite the opposite. What Dan wanted to talk about was sport. Any sport. All sport. It was a crutch he could lean on: diversion, salvation and an unbreakable bond between us. It was his lifeblood. Of course, in the grand scheme of things sport is unimportant, but for us it was the most important unimportant thing in the world – what Stephen Fry calls 'that glorious distraction'. (Although Stephen's a Norwich fan, so in his case it's mainly just distraction.) By sharing with Dan a common language of off-side in football, leg-side in cricket, Grand National winners, decathlon disciplines and so much more, I'd been able to – gently – broach the trickier subjects: money, diet, health.

I'm not proud to admit it, but over the course of the previous weeks and months these cares had begun to drain me too, and I'd felt stalked by worry and stress. At the same time, I'd respond to the onset of these emotions by telling myself, 'If it's bad for

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you, how do you think Dan feels?' Thankfully I wasn't on my own. Mum and Lucy were there for him just as much as I was, and it was Lucy who'd helped him apply for the state benefits to which he was entitled. (He'd have struggled to navigate the forms on his own.) If he'd been leaning especially on me, it was because they didn't have the same hinterland into which he wanted to go deep and escape.

That Sunday morning I travelled to Mum's place in Selsdon, on the southern edge of Croydon, and I'm so glad I did, because it turned out there was a specific reason for the get-together. It was the happiest news: Lucy was pregnant. For the first time she'd be a mum, our mum would be a grandma, and Dan and I would be uncles. Sunday lunch was suddenly a celebration, and we shared a toast. But as time ticked on – the roast dinner untouched and going cold – there was no sign of Dan.

This wasn't entirely out of the ordinary. Dan had a habit of going off-grid and not replying to messages, and his timekeeping was erratic at best. (Unless Crystal Palace were involved. In a quarter of a century he barely missed a kick-off). Given he hadn't been on top form recently, it wasn't hard to imagine he might prefer to spend Sunday resting at home rather than trekking across London. Still, we thought, he said he'd be here, and he loved a roast. If he changed his mind he'd usually let us know. Maybe he was sleeping? He'd developed a habit of nodding off regularly when we watched TV together, so an unscheduled nap wasn't out of the question. Maybe he was cross about something? But what? The afternoon passed and the silence continued. More texts were sent; no replies came. Perhaps his phone had given up the ghost? After all, he did use a battered old 'dumb' model which had to pack up sooner or later. All these harmless explanations. We hadn't begun to consider the alternatives.

Dan had never been officially diagnosed with any mental health issues, and as a kid I just thought he was a bit unusual. A touch of paranoia. Talking to himself in the bathroom.

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Compulsively checking he'd shut the front door, pulling so hard it seemed he might take the handle off. Carrying incongruous objects around with him. (Only a couple of months earlier I'd spotted an old 1980s telephone poking out of his bag. When I asked him why, he simply smiled a guilty smile and zipped the bag up.) With twenty-first century eyes, perhaps this could have been identified and understood as neurodiverse behaviour. But during our childhood years, society too often ignored this kind of thing or brushed it away as eccentricity. Dan was part of a generation whose mental well-being fell through the cracks of the system, or what then passed for a system. How many middle-aged men and women (Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands? More?) must be living now with conditions never treated, understood, or even acknowledged, without professional support? My brother's case was exacerbated by a cruel double whammy: he craved privacy, yet he didn't really know how to look after himself. Sometimes I wonder how he managed as well as he did. This unusual chemistry of character traits could manifest itself in Dan not responding to calls or messages for a couple of days. But while his silences weren't usually alarming, that Sunday afternoon it felt odd.

The next day, Monday, we all tried to carry on as normal. In the evening I even went on a Tinder date to see a play, which ended in a kiss by the ticket barriers at Leicester Square Tube. But my mind was running away elsewhere. (Sorry, Daisy.) Home at this point was my best friend Tom's place in Wood Green, where I'd been taking refuge after a thirteen-year relationship with my ex-girlfriend Sarah had broken down the year before. It was a happy house in an unlovely neighbourhood that I shared with Tom and our housemate Jules. I'd nearly got back from the date when Mum called. It was 10.30 p.m., which was very late for her to be up. 'I'm worried,' she said. So was I. We needed to find Dan. I tried to keep us both calm and offered to go over to his flat straightaway if she thought that was best. But if everything was OK, as we obviously hoped it

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was, then he'd probably be asleep and wouldn't hear me knocking. So what if instead I went over there first thing in the morning? Mum agreed and we said goodnight.

Half of me stayed rational, refusing to entertain dark thoughts. The other half was racing. When I got home I told Jules what was going on. Ever a voice of reason, she did all she could to offer reassurance, but the words just bounced off me. Come dawn I found myself sitting on the loo, shaking and Googling 'What to do if you find a dead body'.

Now it's nearly 9 a.m. on Tuesday morning and I've reached the front of number 43, Ifield Road. Slap-bang in one of London's richest areas, on a street filled with million-pound houses, Dan's minuscule second-floor studio flat is an aberration, like a pimple on a supermodel. I'd barely been back since I'd helped him move in nearly a decade ago. That day we'd celebrated completing the heavy lifting by watching a World Cup 2006 group game in a nearby café. (It was the cabbie and I who did the heavy lifting. Dan wasn't a picture of fitness even then.) It's a tiny memory that's fluttered back, stained with guilt. Should I have done more to reach out over the intervening years? He never wanted me to meet him here. He'd always say he was in the middle of 'doing some sorting' – code for his flat being a complete tip – but by accepting that boundary had I failed him? Could I have tried more? Would there be a chance to try again?

Right now I just need to get up to his flat, and to do that I'm going to need someone from one of the other apartments to let me into the building, except – wait – the front door is ajar. Weird. It's a quirk of fortune I'm grateful to receive. I run in and pound up the stairs; bang on his door; call out his name.

No response.

I phone his mobile and push my ear up against the door to listen. I can hear it ringing. And ringing. 'I'm here, bro!' I shout out. 'I'm calling 999. If you can hear me, help's coming.'

No response.

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I dial emergency services and explain the situation, my voice dry and breaking. The operator tells me police and an ambulance are on their way.

Until they come I don't really know what to do. My brother may or may not be on the other side of this thick wooden door, and he may or may not be alive. All I can do is wait. I head back downstairs, wedge the house door open with a phone book, and sit on the steps outside. I feel very small.

It takes an hour, an excruciating hour, before the police arrive. (The ambulance never does.) At last two constables turn up: one is young, tall and friendly. Probably new in the job. He introduces himself as PC Evans. The other is older, pony-tailed, short and grizzled, hanging back and offering no greeting. Before I can ask anything, Constable Noname gets a message on his radio: 'Negative from the hospital.'

Damn. Until now I'd been allowing myself the briefest glimmer of hope that maybe Dan is just ill and he'd gone to A&E without his phone – that would explain everything. Make the panic end. But now, in just four words, that faint possibility has been extinguished. I swallow hard and tell the officers what I know, and they follow me upstairs. Between the two policemen hangs a portable battering ram, and they ask me to stand aside. A brief smash, and PC Evans forces his way in.

'Is he in there?' his colleague asks.

'Yeah, he's here.'

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3

A Wake's Progress

Do you have someone special with whom you share your favourite passion? Who'll text you when the winning horse he picked in the 1992 Grand National passes away; who you'll phone on Saturday night to pore over the classified results; who'll text you when the winning horse you picked in the 1994 Grand National passes away; whose shared highs, lows and near misses bind you together with atomic force? Until that morning I had Dan.

Picture him as two parts Danny Baker to one part Ronnie Corbett. He had a nervous manner, a slightly rasping voice and a lexicon that was ingrained with Eighties and Nineties television. (His shorthand for me, 'bro', wasn't an attempt to sound cool – Dan had taken it from an obscure sketch in an even more obscure early Nineties comedy show called *Paramount City.*)

There was another distinctive trait to how he sounded. He used to love joining in with Crystal Palace chants at Selhurst Park, or with *Top of the Pops 2* at Christmas time, but he had an uncanny ability to do it in musical keys no other member of the human race had previously discovered. In my very first music lesson at secondary school, I remember the teacher Mr Vincent looking across at the whole class and proclaiming to us that there was no such thing as being tone deaf, and that in his professional career there was never a single boy he hadn't been able to teach to sing. Then he turned to me and said, 'Except your brother.' It was a kind of fame, and I was kinda proud. I

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studied my piano grades; Dan's choral skills were weapons grade. I can still hear his undulcet tones loud and clear in my head. But I'd swap everything to hear them for real. A sound more endearing than any actual music could ever be.

Most distinctive of all, he had the happiest happy-face I've ever seen, soundtracked by the cackliest laugh. Dan was the only friend I'd known my whole life. It wasn't remotely long enough. He was a keystone in my Jenga tower, and now he was gone I could feel my whole edifice teeter. He'd been taken away by diabetes, but we weren't to know that for weeks, as he'd never been formally diagnosed and was on no medication for it. At the time of the funeral, we still didn't know the details of what had happened. When exactly had he passed? How preventable was it? Might he even have taken his own life? We were in the dark. And the darkness.

Nobody's first wake should be their own brother's. There was only one place in the world for it that would do.

I'd been to the Palace so often I'd lost count. This was different. I stepped out of the car and edged towards Selhurst Park's main entrance feeling weary and punch-drunk. The legions of devoted Eagles fans who flock here on match days must know that sensation well, but for them it tends to descend as they leave the ground if the team has taken a hammering. I was on my way in. Selhurst is the home of Crystal Palace Football Club: Dan's alma mater, pater and every other relation besides. We'd been there together dozens of times. But this afternoon I wasn't being funnelled up the imposing slope of Holmesdale Road or through the creaky turnstiles of the Arthur Wait Stand. Instead a new eeriness was radiating from the main entrance.

For most football fans the plushly upholstered VIP suite is simply not for us. But here I was with what was left of my family, taking hesitant steps inside the club's inner sanctum. Lucy and David took the lead; I followed, holding Mum's hand, head buzzing. Jostling with the unsavoury mix of sadness and adrenaline

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that had been fuelling me all day was an undeniable curiosity. It felt uncouth to admit, but I actually wanted this rare peek behind the curtain, to catch a glimpse of the forbidden Palace. I just ached beyond measure for Dan to be sharing it with me. Since 1986 I hadn't entered this stadium without him; never even let the thought of doing so flash through my mind. And yet here we were, because of him, at his spiritual home, saying goodbye.

Sandwiched between two mighty yet spindly TV towers and hemmed in by residential streets as only the best traditional grounds are, Selhurst Park has really grown on me over the years. When I was a kid, this ramshackle old cauldron never made much of an impression: it would flirt with life as a top-flight venue while the team yo-yoed between divisions, and its higgledy-piggledy shape didn't look like the great arenas beloved of TV cameras such as Anfield, Old Trafford or St James's Park. Besides, we'd pass it every weekend in the car on the way to Dad's office nearby, so over the years it became more and more familiar, and less and less cool. It was hard to see Palace as much more than the butt of constant family jokes, not just because they were the local team but because they were *Dan's* team. Since then, though, time seems to have woven a spell on the place. As old grounds across the country are sold off and smashed to bits, replaced by identikit Americanised bowls on the edge of anonymous ring roads, so the strange lustre of Selhurst has grown. To us, it felt as much Dan's place as Crystal Palace's. I always assumed my brother would bring me back here again. But never like this.

We climbed the staircase to the function room, and in the hiatus before other mourners arrived from the funeral we made final preparations. Lucy tied two balloons to each table in Palace colours, one red, one blue, matching the clothes she'd picked specially for the occasion; I hitched my phone to speakers and a playlist of Dan's favourite music began to percolate through the room, throwing a thin and invisible comfort blanket over us.

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Football's coming home. . . 'Three Lions' isn't exactly a profound piece of music, but it contains a kernel of what Dan and I had in common. Two wonderful things: sport and comedy. Together, I like to think, they explain why he loved Crystal Palace. But they had also helped immeasurably in those detestable days between his death and funeral, when time seemed to stand still and I found myself sucked into grief's whirlpool of emotions – incomprehension, confusion, sorrow, regret, fear, frustration and occasionally plain boredom. I'd reacted by retreating to the sofa with some comfort TV, binge-watching our favourite old sitcoms and the 2012 Olympics DVD box set (my copy of which was as yet unopened: 'Break cellophane in case of emergency', it seemed to implore). Memories erupted like fireworks. And I cried. Difficult tears. Necessary tears. By celebrating Dan's loves, here at least was the smallest of rafts on which to float through those bitter first weeks.

Guests began filtering in to join us in the Palace Suite. In the vanguard was my octogenarian great-aunt Sheila, who'd grown up in the Blitz and remained a tower of strength to us, even now as she walked with a cane. How many painful deaths must she have mourned? My dad's ten years ago, his mum's in childbirth before that, now Dan's, and many more. I snatched a breath and put away the thought. Soon a thrum of conversation filled the room as groups of friends and family clustered, chatted and commiserated. The scene was warmer and more welcoming than I could have imagined or hoped. I'd been dreading the special mix of grief and awkwardness which a wake threatens, but instead wherever I looked there were people sharing stories, strangers meeting for the first time, and old friends reunited. Everyone was sad, but there were smiles and laughter too, which twinkled across the room like flashbulbs at a 100 metres final. I wanted to be everywhere at once, hearing each story and wrapping myself in the warmth of it, but just to see all this love was a tonic. It's odd that our culture reserves such unalloyed displays of affection for someone for after

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